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ABSTRACT

The methodology and problems of research on cross-age tutoring are reported. Using a phenomenological framework, the two researchers involved in the study worked toward a research method and design that would account for the backgrounds of both; one was trained in the quantifiable methods of natural science, the other in qualitative methods of human science. The study focused on the relationship that developed between eighth graders and first graders paired in a tutoring program. The researchers' graduate assistants observed and interviewed children involved in the program throughout the semester. Differences in approach between the principal investigators surfaced in decisions about the need for hypotheses, objectivity in a situation requiring involvement, reliability, and generalizability. Data analysis has so far only dealt with the observations. More problems may arise in analyzing the interviews and presenting final results. Further issues arising from a phenomenological approach include the need to consider observer reactions, the need for the principal investigators to be directly involved in data collection, and the need to study the teachers' reactions to the tutoring. Despite all the differences the researchers conclude that this collaboration has helped them to confront their own biases. (IS)

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Re-searching an Ethnographic Study from a Phenomenological Perspective

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A Paper Presented at

The Mid-South Educational Research Association Annual Convention

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INTRODUCTION

What is it like to work on a research project with a colleague whose research orientation has historically been at the opposite end of the spectrum from your own? This is a situation that a colleague and I have been in since last fall when we agreed to work together on a project studying a cross-age tutoring situation between eighth and first graders in our University Laboratory School. My colleague's research orientation has been centered in the natural science tradition of quantifiable methods, whereas mine has centered in the human science tradition of qualitative methods, i.e. phenomenology. Our journey this past year in deciding on how to approach the research project, how to collect and analyze data has been a challenging experience for us both. We both have had to re-search our perspectives and position on the what, how, when, where, and meaning of research.

An advantage which my colleague and I have had was our willingness to discuss our differing perspectives and approach to research to find a common ground in which we could both comfortably function without giving up <u>all</u> of our grounded beliefs about how best to do educational research. Thus, we wrestled within ourselves and verbally with one another concerning deviating or modifying from our methods of how "best" to do research. To be willing and able to question and discuss our differing perspectives was important for me. If we are unable as researchers to discuss and see perspectives which differ from our own, how can we be open to seeing anything other than our own perspective/views in

our own research?

THE PHENOMONOLOGICAL METHOD

Historically, phenomenology roots are in the philosophy of Edmund Hursel, Martin Heidegyer, Kierkgaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (for an overview of the development and individual perspectives see Roche, 1973). Philosophically, phenomenology provides a grounding of perception: seeing and accepting the world as one first finds it, trying to figure out how it works from those directly involved in a context bound situation. Then methods can be created that yield solutions to emerging problems. Reality is not bound by preconceived notions but is viewed in its total complexity and idiosyncrasy.

A phenomenological method is committed to studying the things one wants to know about in its natural, everyday setting to better understand the meaning of the experience in its completeness. It is when one understands a situation or experience from the perspective of those persons in the particular situation that one is in a position to see alternative solutions to problems. Gadamer (1975, p.466) has said that "The only scientific thing is to recognize what is , instead of starting from what ought to be." Thus, phenomenology studies "what is" in the everyday world and uses everyday language, for the everyday language does not exclude anyone from understanding the phenomena.

As a natural science researcher using a phenomenological method, one commits himself/herself to the phenomena being studied. It involves an interplay of accurate descriptions of what is being studied, rich in detailed information about first hand experiences — also including the researchers own

perceptions and reactions to the phenomena being studied. Reflection of the descriptions and phenomena allows for a re-searching of the phenomena and opportunity to discover/re-discover that which had been overlooked. Critical to phenomenology is the transporting of the researcher, and the reader of the research, into an experience in hopes of gaining insight from the perspectives of those having experienced a particular phenomena. The hope is that we will better understand their point of view.

Situations involving humans are complex and an infinite diversity of interpretations are possible. Finding solutions that fit unique situations and individuals calls for a diversity of possibilites. As educators, we are then in a more realistic position to devise solutions to the problems brought to our awareness. We can then attempt to help in education with the situations as we find them.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The eighth and first grade University Laboratory School teachers were curious as to what was going on with their students in the process of tutoring aside from specific skill building, and wanted some documentation to help in assessing their evaluation of the benefits and possible changes needed in the program. They had made some assumptions from observing students in previous tutoring programs, especially regarding changes over time in the relationship between the tutoring partners (i.e. the eighth graders became more aware of first graders being around and talked to them; eighth graders protecting first graders on playground during fights). A relationship appeared to develop out of the tutoring experience and which extended to other situations outside of the

alloted tutoring time. Just what was occurring between the tutoring pair along with the academics? What changes occurred during and as a result of the helping relationship? Our task thus began in figuring out the best way to discover what the tutoring/helping situation involved and meant to the students.

Throughout the research project my colleague and I worked with two graduate research assistants. Both were involved in the efforts of questioning, discussing, and decision making (with one graduate assistant carrying a more dominant role in coordinating the data collection and tabulation). The focus of the project was twofold in that we wanted to know the nature of the tutoring relationship and their experience of the process. My colleague expressed his interest in approaching this project from a more naturalistic perspective using ethnographic techniques of observation and interview to gather data. This made sense to me as I believe it is important to "go to the things themselves" in their natural setting to see and hear about an experience. Even though we agreed broadly on the method by which we would obtain an understanding of the situation, questions and concerns arose regarding whether or not hypotheses were needed: what purposes hypotheses would serve and their effect on what we would see or not see; how would we justify objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalizability in light of the dominant research expectations for what constitutes truly scientific research? Would our educational research colleagues be as willing to view/accept/understand an alternative method of research in the pursuit of understanding a situation?

Since my research lenses clearly focus in a natural setting, observing the whole of the situation, and talking to the persons involved in an experience about the experience, I felt quite comfortable with our decision of how to gain an understanding of the cross-age tutoring process and relationship. We did

banter back and forth about hypotheses and finally agreed on the need to keep our focus open. Developing hypotheses would restrict our focus and ability to obtain rich descriptions from observations, and limit what information we would have to re-search to gain awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the many possible dynamics and complexities involved.

Sardello (1971) has stated that objectivity can be understood in one of three ways: 1) objectivity is usually taken to mean a total independence between the observer and observed; 2) objectivity refers to the true value of knowledge, and in this sense to be objective means to know reality as it is not; and 3) the most primordial meaning of objectivity is an attitude of respectful openness of the world of our existence which allows, through our involvement in the world, reality to reveal itself the way it is. My approach to objectivity is through Sardello's third definition in being open to the whole of our existence, investigating and describing phenomena as consciously (i.e., pretheoretically) experienced, exactly as it reveals itself to the experiencing person in all its concreteness and particularity. My colleague and I quite naturally wrestled with how one can be objective when the researcher is so much a part of the recording and interpretative process. True, such an approach is subjective because it studies personal experiences, and biases are naturally a part of any research. But our biased viewpoint can be communicated to the reader. If readers know why you are doing the study, what your major interests, questions, beliefs and commitments are before, during, and after you begin, they can be-(a)ware. The human investigator is like a magnifying glass which focuses on something and brings it to light. The reader is going to see the particular phenomena in a new way, and with some distortion. Telling about yourself and making your instrument (i.e. you) a part of the study allows the reader to know

where lies the distortion. The result is a clearer picture.

Reliability and generalizability did not present a concern for me. Although I believe that amidst the diversity of experience and personal perspectives there are common themes which can be found in, and unite, similar experiences or situations, there does exist a significant amount of information which will not fit in anywhere. To me, this is most important to acknowledge and not hide because it does not conform to the general trend of findings or preconceived hypotheses. The reader of the research can make the decision, after reading the procedures and results, whether or not it holds truths for them. And how can one truly replicate a situation with humans? Predicting the human future with experimental evidence may cloud or disregard the reality of human choice and the power of a particular set of circumstances. It is therefore important, I believe, to let the human condition speak for itself, letting the readers discover any generalities which may exist. If it isn't found, then that in itself is significant.

Briefly, our research team decided on the following means of collecting data: the graduate research assistants were to be the observers and interviewers. Observations were done from the conception of the tutoring process, beginning with the eight graders "training" (planning and putting on a play to 'present' themselves to the first graders; re-learning/practicing how to print so as to be able to make flash cards and to be able to communicate in an understandable written form with the first graders; and how to present, review, create meanings of new words to the first graders). Observations continued during the semester long tutoring activities which at times took them from the classroom to the playground. The observers recorded in detail overt behaviors, dialogue, gestures, and facial expressions, conscientiously noting the time in

the margin every five minutes. My colleague thought that we might perhaps need to know if behaviors occurred in the beginning, middle, or end of tutoring sessions. I did not find this a necessary measure to take but one potentially interfering with the observations in having to be acutely tuned to clock watching and an ever present pressure not to forget 'time.' Such an external pressure diverts attention and involvement of the more important task, that of detailed observation. Also, a chronology of change over time could have been obtained from the detailed descriptions, described in words rather than numbers.

During the middle and at the end of the semester the students involved in the tutoring program were interviewed. The first interview was formal, concerning times when someone they knew was and was not good at helping them. Concern was taken to ask the questions in reverse order every other time. A group of students from another school, not involved in tutoring, were also interviewed using the same questions (it was difficult at times for my colleague not to have some safeguards, i.e. control measures, to have handy in case our methods were questioned. So even though we were using more open methods there were tugs to include measures of control). The second interview was informal. A set of questions were established to ask such things as what it was like to be a part of the tutoring, what was liked most and least about it, what would make it better, and what they thought of the other person with whom they worked. There was more freedon this time to ask follow-up questions to clarify what the students had said and to ask for elaboration. Bravo! This method of gathering additional information taps a most important source of information -- the person who has directly experienced the phenomona. Their understanding of the situation and their experiences are highly valuable in our understanding of the situation.

One important source of information was lost. The teachers did not keep up with their recording of activities, reactions, and observations during the tutoring semester. As a result, we lost a tremendous source of current information, whose recollections are now quite dusty and tarnished. Looking back, it would have perhaps been more beneficial to rely on interviewing them periodically throughout the semester.

Data analysis has thus far dealt with the observations. Our research team decided to read the observations separately and come up with the themes we perceived as being within the descriptions, i.e. important and/or recurring events. We then gathered together to check internal reliability, comparing our themes to find out where we agreed and disagreed. We all provided our rationale for each by citing specific observations or dialogue, and agreed upon ten themes. Our analysis of the interviews will continue in the same fashion. Agreeing upon how we will integrate and present the results will be another interesting encounter!

ADDITIONAL REACTIONS FROM A PHENOMENOLOGICAL FOCUS

There are several other points with which I would take issue had this project used more of a phenomenological approach. One important facet missing is the personal reactions and insights of the observers. When the researcher is the instrument in the study it is necessary to use all of its resources. Their involvement in the process gives them, too, a unique perspective from which to see, understand, and re-present the phenomena for the readers understanding. After some discussion and hesitation the observers did take a few minutes at the end of each observation period to jot down some of their personal reactions.

But there was not any other time spent reflecting, in a written form, while the images, thoughts, and feelings were fresh. It is true that phenomenology implies the trustworthiness of human consciousness.

Another difficulty I now see in looking back on the procedures of the project is in having the research assistants do the observing. Although they both are most conscientious, highly responsible, and observant persons, I am now finding that there is much that I missed in not being the direct observer, recorder, and interviewer. I do trust their reactions and understandings of the process, which they have told me about. A wealth of descriptions exist from which we will write a meaningful description of factors involved in cross -age tutoring in this particular situation. What I do not have is a direct and personal mingling with the children from which to write my understand of this phenomena. True, I am able to write about this project and what we did. I will also be able to describe our results and implications for future research. Thus, had this project been phenomenologically based, I would have had to be involved much more beyond providing the theoretical and procedural framework. I would have to be involved in the thick of things - of using myself as an important research tool in the process of understanding the phenomena.

Another area which I would expand upon if I were to use a phenomenological framework for this project would be to do more talking to the children on a casual basis during their school day. I would also want to observe beyond the tutoring times to glean a flavor of the chidren interacting in other situations and with other persons. It would be during these observation times that moments would emerge for dialogue in an even more natural setting (even informal interviews take a person away from a truely natural and spontaneous interaction and sharing).

I would also be curious, in rounding out the whole of the tutoring phenomena, to spend time observing the teacher and his or her interactions with

the children, aside from interviewing them as previously mentioned. Since we are looking at the tutoring process, how does he or she model a helping relationship while teaching and interacting with the children? What did they do specially in training and preparing the students for the process? Descriptions would be needed not only in what they did but how they did it - voice tone, implications of words versus action, style of interacting (authoritarian or democratic), to mention a few.

In spite of my focus of wanting to look at the whole and become part of the 'mess' in my attempt to understand the 'mess,' the process of modifying my frame of reference for this project has been an interesting experience. It has provided me the opportunity to share my biased perspective of doing research and at the same time discuss my colleague's biased perspective. This process has provided opportunities, through dialogue and practice, to mold a more flexible perspective in the importance of using a method and techniques which best suits the situation.

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